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ABSTRACT

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An Investigation of Reading Attitudes and Self-Perceptions of Students Reading On and Below Grade Level

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between reading attitudes, self-perceptions and reading achievement among second and sixth graders. The sample consisted of 84 second graders (39 females, 45 males) and 71 sixth graders (32 females, 39 males). Participants responded to the Estes Attitude Scales for reading, math and science and the "About Myself Scale" (a measure of self-perception). As predicted, second grade students displayed more positive attitudes on all scales administered than did the sixth grade students. In addition, below grade level readers scored more negatively on all scales than on grade level readers. Implications and intervention strategies are discussed.

Introduction

We all appreciate the importance of having a successful beginning in school. Today, much emphasis is placed on ensuring that all students read well by the end of third grade. It has been said that "learning to read is the central learning activity undertaken by kids during the first few years of school" (Chapman & Tunmer,1995). It seems logical to assume that children who "crack the code" to read independently would enjoy reading more and display more favorable attitudes toward the activity. There has been considerable research on the significance of early reading experiences that support this presumption. Henk & Melnick (1995) found that how a individual feels about him/herself as a reader clearly influences reading patterns such as whether reading is sought or avoided and the amount of effort put forth both in decoding and comprehension. Furthermore, children with successful reading experiences tend to read more often and for longer periods of time leading to greater reading achievement. Their attitudes toward reading are usually more positive (Thames & Reeve,1994). On the other hand, the achievement of children who have unsuccessful reading experiences tends to suffer (Henk & Melnick). A defining factor between successful and unsuccessful experiences is that success enables a student to read for information as well as pleasure, whereas students who experience initial difficulties must focus on the more mundane task of developing basic word level competence. These students cannot afford to read for pleasure because they spend more time on decoding than on comprehending. The significance of early reading experiences has led many researchers to investigate the effects of early and continuous reading failure.

Research has led many to conclude that early reading difficulties is one of the strongest predictors of eventual school failure (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). Chapman & Tunmer (1995) define school failure as lowered expectations for future achievement, maladaptive belief systems, generalized deficits, negative expectations and lowered motivation. Of particular interest to this study is the noticeable decline in positive attitudes

toward reading and the emergence of negative self-beliefs (Chapman & Tunmer,1995) The present study investigates patterns of self-perceptions and reading attitudes in 2nd and 6th grade. Past research has shown clear age-related effects (Bouffard,1998). Much of this research has focused on self-perceptions and reading attitudes of young children (K-3). There is some controversy over whether children this age are cognitively able to accurately assess and articulate their achievement and self-perceptions (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). Often, children will rank their reading ability high relative to their classmates regardless of their actual achievement (Wigfield,1994). Six year olds beliefs about their reading ability do not always correlate with their actual achievement. Chapman & Tunmer (1995) maintain that children experiencing early difficulties can maintain high self-evaluations until they understand the normative conception of ability, the realization that ongoing difficulties may mean they are less able than their peers. Other researchers also hypothesize that early reading difficulty may be masked by positive teacher feedback and encouragement (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). Many researchers have shown that young children who experience initial reading difficulties do begin developing negative achievement related beliefs and behaviors such as lowered expectations for future achievement (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). This is consistent with Chapman & Tunmer's (1995) findings that children's performances on reading and reading related tasks are directly associated with the development of reading self-perceptions, an association that begins to form during the second and third years of school. Research has shown that reading attitudes and self-perceptions of poor readers decline as students progress through the grades.

It seems logical that when negative attitudes persist students continue to have unsuccessful reading experiences causing a progressive decline in attitude. "As initial uncorrected problems in reading become established patterns of difficulty and poor performance, children's perceptions of competence come into line with actual achievement" (Chapman & Tunmer,1995). In other words, poor readers display lower

competence beliefs. Chapman & Tumner found that the correlation between students' beliefs about their reading ability and their actual reading achievement was .70. Wigfield & Eccles (1994) found that by ages 10-12, students rated their reading ability lower and more varied than did 6-8 year olds. This is attributed to the fact that as children get older they begin to use multiple sources of evaluative criteria. One such source that appears to become important as students age is social comparison. As students reach 10 and 12 they are often concerned with how they compare to their peers. They are also better able to use such information to gain a more accurate sense of their relative standing (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). Another stumbling block for older children is that they begin to view their ability as a rather stable entity (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). With this may come feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Wigfield & Eccles (1994) found that lower competence beliefs/attitudes may lead children to view reading activities as less useful and important. By doing so, these students can maintain more positive self-perceptions. It appears that repeated negative experiences with reading may lead to counteraction- an avoidance of reading through refusal, disinterest, or lack of effort (Thames & Reeves,1994). Add to all this the finding that older children tend to value academic tasks less than do younger children and it becomes clear why a cyclic pattern of failure may develop (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). It is essential that educators provide early successful reading experiences for all children and have effective, early interventions for students experiencing difficulty.

In a study of learning disabled versus normal achieving students it was found that, in both achievement groups, reading satisfaction was less favorable among sixth than third graders (Bear et al,1998). Although the learning disabled students had more difficulty with reading than the normal achieving students, only at the sixth grade was this difference reflected in student self-evaluations. Sixth grade learning disabled students compared themselves less favorably and reported less reading satisfaction than did third grade learning disabled students (Bear et al,1998). The present study seeks to discover if similar results will surface between on grade level and below grade level readers at 2nd and 6th

grade. Research shows that attitudes toward reading are not expected to correlate with academic performance until patterns of success and failure have been established. This study will explore specific patterns of change for below and on grade level readers on dimensions of reading attitudes and general self-perceptions. Thames & Reeves (1994) define attitude as the "long term result of many experiences (both negative and positive) and resulting beliefs" (p 294). Based on the research, we expect that attitudes and self perceptions of the 2nd graders, both on and below grade level readers, will be more positive than those of the 6th graders. While we do not expect to find a relationship between reading achievement and attitudes and self-perceptions at the 2nd grade level, we do expect to find such a correlation at the 6th grade level. Because the 6th graders reading below grade level have had continuous and uncorrected difficulty with reading, we expect that they will have more negative reading attitudes and self-perceptions than their peers reading on grade level. Through the investigation of this topic, we hope to provide insight into the significance of early reading experiences and their formative effects on children's self-perceptions, reading attitudes and overall achievement.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were second and sixth graders from two rural Virginia school districts. The second grade sample consisted of 84 students: 39 females and 45 males, 24 below grade level readers and 60 on grade level readers. The sixth grade sample consisted of 71 students: 32 females and 39 males, 48 below grade level readers and 23 on grade level readers. The classroom teachers provided each child's reading level.

Procedure

Two questionnaires were administered to the participants. The first, the elementary version of the Estes Attitude Scales, was used to measure students' attitudes toward three content areas (reading, math and science). Each section consists of 14 statements to which

students either "agree", "disagree" or "don't know". See Appendix A to examine the questionnaire. The "About Myself Scale" (Bear et al,1998) was used to measure students self-perceptions. It consists of 5 general statements designed to measure general liking of oneself. Students responded on a scale from 1-4 (1 being "strongly disagree" and 4 being "strongly agree"). The response requirements of both scales were taught to the students by means of examples. See Appendix B for a copy of this document. The questionnaires were completed in each classroom as a whole group in one session. Total administration time for all surveys was approximately 25 minutes. No names were put on the questionnaires to ensure each students confidentiality.

Results

Upon gathering and examining our data we found that some students, either intentionally or inadvertently, failed to respond to some of the statements on the Estes Attitude Scales. After much consideration, we decided to mark these missing statements with "don't know"- the answer in the middle. Since we were looking at changes in attitudes across the grade levels on the basis of reading level (on or below grade level), we decided to focus our search on correlations, looking for relationships, not causation, and means. When we attained the mean scores, we rounded all to the nearest hundredth.

We looked first at the specific hypotheses we proposed. As predicted, we found that reading attitudes and self-perceptions were overall more positive in second grade than in sixth. Moderate negative correlations were found between grade level and reading attitude (- 2227) and grade level and self-perceptions (- 2881). The mean reading attitude for second graders was 72.39, for sixth graders it was 59.03. Second graders scored a mean of 90.60 on the self-perception scale while their sixth grade counterparts' mean score was 82.68. No correlation was found between reading level and reading attitude and self-perception at the second grade level. However, we did find a positive correlation between self-perceptions and reading attitudes (4264). It appears that regardless of

reading level, lower self-perceptions are somehow related to more negative attitudes toward reading. In addition, our second grade data revealed a moderate positive correlation between gender and reading attitude (.3119). Boys were more likely to have less positive reading attitudes than their female peers. The reading attitude mean for males was 64.42, for females it was 81.84. This relationship can be examined more closely in the accompanying graph- see Appendix C.

Although we did not find a statistically significant relationship between reading level and reading attitudes and self-perceptions at the sixth grade level, we did find that the mean reading attitude for below grade level readers was 57.18 while the mean for on grade level readers was 62.8. In fact, we observed that below grade level readers, both second and sixth graders, had less positive attitudes on all the scales (reading attitude, math attitude, science attitude, and self-perceptions) than their on grade level peers. Furthermore, the means on all the scales decreased from second to sixth grade. See Appendix D to examine the means for all the data collected.

In both second and sixth grade, positive correlations were observed between math and science, reading and science, and reading and math. Generally, the strength of these correlations was higher at the sixth grade level. A complete list of correlations can be found in Appendix E.

Discussion

The results showed definite trends worthy of discussion. As the results revealed, below grade level readers showed less positive attitudes in all areas surveyed while boys displayed much less favorable reading attitudes. It is important to remember that correlation does not equal causation and that in all likelihood there are a myriad of variables at play. We do want to take the time to discuss plausible reasons for the observed results.

Reading attitudes and self-perceptions were overall more positive in second grade than in sixth. This is consistent with past research that found that older children tend to value academic tasks less (hence, less positive attitudes) than do younger children (Wigfield & Eccles,1994). In addition, academic intrinsic motivation appears to decline as students grow older. These are two excellent reasons why we as educators must provide frequent positive feedback, especially at the higher grades. This decline may also be a result of the school environment at the middle school level, a topic for further discussion later.

As hypothesized, no correlation was found between reading level and reading attitude and reading level and self-perceptions at the second grade level. Much of the literature cited beforehand states that young children's beliefs about their reading ability do not always correlate with their actual achievement. At this age it also appears that children do not rely on social comparison as a means to evaluate their reading performance. Young children also benefit from the encouragement and positive feedback from both their parents and teachers. This may serve to overshadow any negative feelings they may be developing about their reading ability. It is questionable as to whether older students, such as sixth graders, receive the same amount of encouragement and feedback and if it has a positive effect or if it succumbs to the negative consequences of ongoing difficulty. This certainly is an important area for future study.

That we found a correlation between self-perceptions and reading attitude (.4264) in second grade is a bit of a mystery. It appears that regardless of reading level, if you have low self-perceptions you may have more negative attitudes toward reading. It is not clear what is the driving variable or other possible factors at play. This too would be an excellent relationship to explore in the future.

Our data revealed a definite trend between gender and reading attitude at both grade levels. Males scored less positively on the reading attitude scale than did their female counterparts. This supports established stereotypes that girls are both better

readers and engage in it for pleasure more so than boys. Along these same lines, we found that more boys were reading below grade level in second grade than were girls. It is important for us as educators to be aware of these tendencies of our male students allowing us to help them develop more positive attitudes and achieve more early success with reading.

One of the most disturbing findings was the relatively low reading attitudes across the board. No group of students, on or below grade level, had a mean reading attitude higher than 81.84. It appears that the majority of our students do not hold very positive attitudes toward the process of reading. Despite the fact that the reasons for such findings are numerous, there are ways in which educators can change students' negative attitudes. It is the duty of educators to instill in students the freedom and knowledge one gains from engaging in reading. Educators must frequently model the satisfaction and pleasure reading brings. Students should, of course, be given opportunities to choose, based on personal preferences, the materials they read. Administering an interest inventory is an excellent way to provide information about reading materials that will be enjoyed by students, which is especially important for struggling readers. Thames and Reeves (1994) found that attitudes of poor readers were positively impacted with tutorial instruction that included trade books related to the student's interest. The importance of students being excited about and engaged in their reading has already been established. If students do not find reading satisfying, they will begin to avoid the process and exert less effort. Thus begins the cycle of negative attitudes and self-concepts alluded to in the introduction.

We did not find a significant correlation between reading level and reading attitude and reading level and self-perceptions at the sixth grade level. Although this contradicts much of the past research, there are some plausible reasons for such results. Perhaps, as previously cited, students who experience prolonged difficulty with reading may engage in discounting or downplaying the importance of domains in which one is inadequate or lacking in competence. This is seen by researchers as a means for children to protect their

self-worth. In addition to discounting, these students reading attitudes may be the effect of counteraction defined as the avoidance of reading through refusal, disinterest, or lack of effort, resulting from repeated negative experiences with reading.

While no significant reading level correlations were observed, definite trends emerged for both second and sixth graders reading below grade level. On all surveys (reading attitude, science attitude, math attitude and self-perception), below grade level readers scored less positively. It may be that many below grade level readers suffer from generalized deficits, meaning they begin to do poorly and respond more negatively in other academic areas as well. Often, those who experience initial difficulties with reading develop negative expectations and lowered motivation (Chapman & Tunmer,1995). This is, of course, cause for alarm and action. It also underscores the necessity for early intervention strategies designed to improve the reading performance of children who experience initial and persistent reading difficulties. We need to provide our students with a positive, accepting environment where individual differences are tolerated, respected and valued. While this is often attempted in the form of classroom meetings at the elementary level, it is frequently not a part of the middle school day where it may be more vital. Students should be provided with more frequent and concrete illustrations of their progress (Henk & Melnick,1995). Attaining established goals plays an important part in the development of a positive self-concept. Having students chart their progress is one way students can visibly see their success. Perhaps the most important thing educators can do is provide frequent positive feedback to struggling readers. Bear et al (1998) found this to be the most common criterion used by students to judge their academic performance. This feedback has a significant impact on reading satisfaction and feelings of self-worth. In fact, research has shown how positive feedback can actually overshadow the negative effects of reading difficulties. One limitation of the present study is that we did not have the opportunity to interview the struggling readers to explore their feelings about teacher feedback. This certainly should be researched more extensively.

Addressing the needs of struggling readers and implementing the above mentioned strategies early on becomes even more critical when one considers the environment that many middle schools offer. As previously mentioned, the role of social comparison becomes increasingly important as students progress through the grades. This happens just as students move into more competitive academic environments in which time is not always made for classroom meetings and other activities that help to build and foster a sense of community. Unfortunately, students must often find their own way in these larger, less personal environments. Add to this the probability that the student/teacher relationship will be less positive and personal and problems/difficulties are extremely likely to occur. There is also the question of whether there exists a difference in the willingness of elementary and middle school teachers to individualize instruction for their struggling readers. Often, middle school teachers feel their job is to work with independent learners. Are sixth graders reading below grade level getting the instruction they need and deserve? This is a crucial question that requires additional study.

The research clearly shows the tremendous impact that reading experiences can have on a child's academic and personal success. It is imperative that educators realize the significant, positive impact they have on all their students. How we go about helping our struggling readers has tremendous social implications for educators here in Virginia. Are we being fair when we expect our students to meet higher standards (SOLS) when they are struggling to read on grade level? Should we be placing money toward helping all our students become successful (on grade level) readers? The problem of struggling readers cannot be brushed away. The results of the present study require us as educators to reevaluate our practices. Research, past and present, reflects the immediate need to intervene with these students early in their educational experiences, before they begin to view their reading ability as stable and before they get into an environment that, at the present time, may not be conducive to supporting struggling readers. Early intervention

may allow us to both improve student attitudes as well as prevent the development of learning problems as children progress through school.

Appendix

Appendix A
ESTES READING ATTITUDE SCALE

If you agree, mark A

If you don't know, mark ?

If you disagree, mark D

	A	?	D
1. Reading is fun for me.	____	____	____
2. Books are boring.	____	____	____
3. Reading is a good way to spend spare time.	____	____	____
4. Reading is exciting.	____	____	____
5. Books do not make good presents.	____	____	____
6. Reading is rewarding to me.	____	____	____
7. Reading becomes boring after about a half hour.	____	____	____
8. Free reading teaches me something.	____	____	____
9. There should be time for free reading during the school day.	____	____	____
10. There are many books I hope to read.	____	____	____
11. Reading is important.	____	____	____
12. A certain amount of time during summer should be set aside for reading.	____	____	____
13. Books usually are good enough to finish.	____	____	____
14. Reading is not exciting.	____	____	____

Appendix B

"ABOUT MYSELF" SCALE

Circle the appropriate number for each statement according to the following scale.

1= strongly disagree
2= disagree
3= agree
4= strongly agree

1. I am usually happy with myself as a person. 1 2 3 4

2. I like the kind of person I am. 1 2 3 4

3. I am a happy person. 1 2 3 4

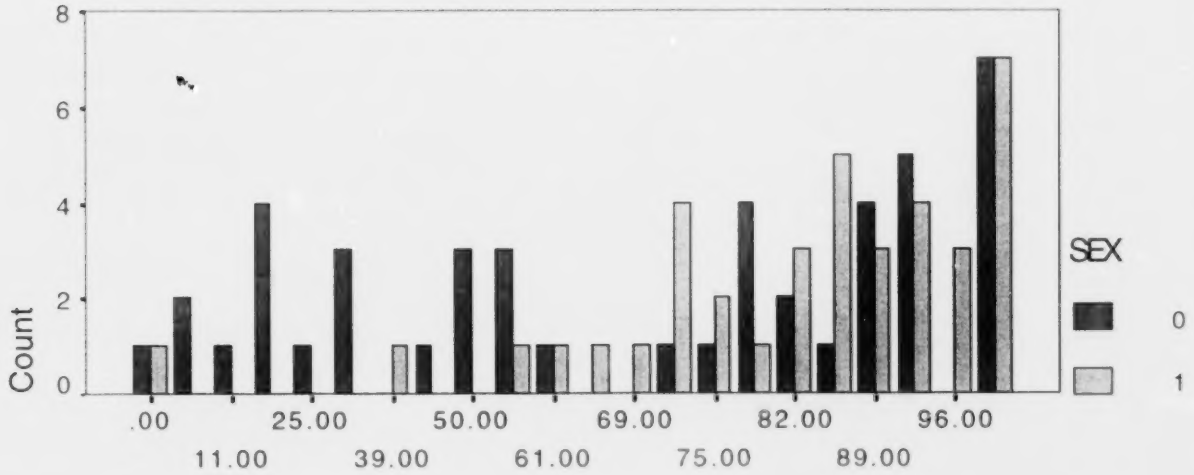
4. I like myself. 1 2 3 4

5. Overall, I am proud of myself. 1 2 3 4

Bear, G., Minke, K., Griffin, S., & Deemer,S. (1998)

Appendix C

2nd Graders Reading Attitude and Gender



reading attitude-%

Appendix D

Mean Scores by Scale and Reading Level

	Children Reading Below Grade Level		Children Reading On Grade Level	
Variable	Second Grade n=24	Sixth Grade n=48	Second Grade n=60	Sixth Grade n=23
Reading Attitude	64.69	57.18	75.35	62.87
Self-Perception	88.91	82.29	91.25	83.48
Math Attitude	65.69	56.49	76.35	72.87
Science Attitude	76.52	66.94	83.48	79.35

Mean Scores by Scale and Gender

	Males		Females	
Variable	Second Grade n=45	Sixth Grade n=39	Second Grade n=39	Sixth Grade n=32
Reading Attitude	64.42	55.30	81.84	63.56
Self-Perception	90.33	84.87	90.92	80.00
Math Attitude	72.08	60.63	74.94	63.34
Science Attitude	79.55	71.87	83.92	69.84

Mean Scores by Scale and Grade Level

Variable	Second Grade (n=84)	Sixth Grade (n=71)
Reading Attitude	72.39	59.03
Self-Perception	90.60	82.68
Math Attitude	73.39	61.87
Science Attitude	81.55	70.95

Appendix E

Correlation Coefficients by Grade Level

	Second Grade	Sixth Grade
Reading Level & Reading Attitude	-.1713	-.0867
Reading Level & Self-Perceptions	-.0943	-.0366
Reading Level and Gender	-.0827	-.0988
Reading Level & Math Attitude	-.2919	-.3830
Reading Level & Science Attitude	-.1719	-.2354
Gender & Reading Attitude	.3119	.1339
Gender & Self-Perceptions	.0264	-.1598
Gender & Math Attitude	.0872	.0673
Gender & Science Attitude	.1200	-.0409
Self-Perceptions & Reading Attitude	.4264	.0929
Self-Perceptions & Math Attitude	.1509	-.0411
Self-Perceptions & Science Attitude	.0532	.2055
Grade Level & Reading Attitude	-.2227	
Grade Level & Self-Perceptions	-.2881	
Grade Level & Math Attitude	-.3017	
Grade Level & Science Attitude	-.2397	

Resources

Bear, G. G., Minke, K. M., Griffin, S. M., & Deemer, S. A. (1998). Achievement-related perceptions of children with learning disabilities and normal achievement: Group and developmental differences. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 31, 91-104.

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